Cú Chulainn Revived: Nostalgia in Modern Receptions of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*

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If you walked along Nassau Street in Dublin, Ireland today, you would come across a large mosaic mural depicting, among other images, a boy wrestling with a hound, two bulls head to head, two warriors fighting with sword and shield and a man dying upright against a tree. This is the Setanta Wall, also called the Táin Wall, created by Belfast artist Desmond Kinney. It recalls visually some scenes from the early Irish epic tale of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, or the *Táin.* If you happened to walk into the General Post Office, you would find a statue of the death of Cú Chulainn, the hero of the *Táin,* sculpted by Oliver Sheppard. In other public buildings and government offices in Dublin, you might find some of the *Táin* tapestries, largescale reproductions of the brush drawings by Louis le Brocquy that complemented Thomas Kinsella's 1969 translation of the *Táin* (Marshall and O'Toole). On Burlington Road, fittingly in front of Connaught House, there is an imposing statue of Queen Maeve sculpted by Patrick O'Reilly. Medb, as her name was earlier spelled, was the mythic queen of Connacht who led her army against Cú Chulainn in the *Táin*. If you travelled north from Dublin to Ardee, you could see another statue of Cú Chulainn, this one called "Cuchulain Carrying the Slain Ferdia." Sculpted by Ann Meldon Hugh, this statue visually retells one of the *Táin*'s most well-known and tragic encounters.[1]

All of these images from modern Ireland recall the old Irish epic of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, which translates to "The Cattle Raid of Cooley." The *Táin* is one of the many tales comprising the Ulster Cycle, a set of around eighty interrelated stories about the Ulaid, a prehistoric people from the north of Ireland, from whom the name "Ulster" derives (Carson xi). Arguably the most

[1] Most of these examples were mentioned to me in a personal communication with Dr. Mary Valante on 29 June 2020.

famous of these tales, the *Táin* tells of a legendary cattle raid in which Queen Medb of Connacht, along with her army gathered from all four provinces of Ireland, invades Ulster to steal a prize bull. The epic hero of the tale is Cú Chulainn, the young Ulster warrior who singlehandedly keeps Medb's forces at bay. First recorded during the Middle Ages, the *Táin* became an obscure piece of literature for centuries until it was "recovered" in the late nineteenth century by Irish intellectuals, whose versions of the narrative have served as inspiration for the mosaic, statues, tapestries and other cultural artifacts listed above.

It just so happens that all these statues and such in modern Ireland are not isolated cases. Rather, they continue a long history of reception of the *Táin*, or the *Táin*'s being retold and reinterpreted over time. What is so significant about this epic that it is alluded to in so many physical markers in today's Ireland? What is the appeal of the Epic in modern day? This thesis engages with these critical questions by examining two modern retellings of the *Táin*: Lady Augusta Gregory's 1902 text *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* and Patrick Hicks' 2007 poem "Reading the Táin," and investigates the underlying motivations of keeping such an old story alive. We will begin with a survey of the medieval epic, including a detailed plot summary, the history of the *Táin*'s medieval transmission, and an overview of some of its most important thematic and stylistic elements. This is to fully understand the old Irish text in order to contextualize the interventions made by the modern retellings. Following the survey of the *Táin* will be an overview of the *Táin*'s reception, or retelling, over time. We will then focus our attention on Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muithemne*—how this reception differs from the *Táin* and how these differences reflect the cultural and political anxieties of the time in which the text was produced. Finally, we will examine Patrick Hicks' "Reading the Táin" and see how this contemporary poetic reception continues the sentiment of nostalgia for an Irish past found in

Lady Gregory. These two case studies of modern reception of the *Táin* serve to represent a wider genealogy of revived Cú Chulainns that populate modern Irish literature, popular culture, and understanding of the past.

A summary of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*

The *Táin* begins with an episode called "The Pillow Talk." Lying in bed, Queen Medb and King Ailill of Connacht compare their wealth. They find that their worldly goods are exactly equal except that Ailill has a prize bull, Finnbennach the White-horned, that no bull of Medb's can match. The only equal to Finnbennach in all of Ireland is the Donn Cuailnge, or Brown Bull of Cooley, in the province of Ulster. Medb and Ailill set out with an army representing all of Ireland (including a group of exiles from Ulster led by Fergus Mac Róich) to take the Brown Bull by force, as his owner has refused to loan him out. On their way northward, Medb encounters a poet woman named Fedelm who foretells the violence that Medb's army will suffer, especially at the hands of Cú Chulainn. In an episode entitled "They Get to Know About Cú Chulainn," Cú Chulainn leaves warnings for the army to find, including the heads of four of their men impaled on a forked stick. Cú Chulainn is the only one able to stand against the Irish army because the rest of the Ulstermen are suffering from the Curse, in which they are struck with labor pains during their time of greatest difficulty.

In the army's camp one night, Ailill suggests that they hear stories of the warriors that they are soon to encounter, and Fergus tells of Cú Chulainn's boyhood deeds. His birth name was Setanta. At five years old, he joined the sporting games of the young men at Emain Macha, the residence of King Conchobar of Ulster. He would play ball, just himself against three fifties of other boys, and always win. At six, he studied warcraft under the female warrior Scáthach in

Scotland, and at seven, he took up arms as a warrior. Before he had weapons, he killed enemies with his sling and hurley-stick. One night, he was arriving late to a feast at the house of Culann, the smith, and was attacked by Culann's ferocious guard hound. Setanta killed the hound with his hurley-stick and ball, and then offered to act as Culann's hound until he could raise and train a replacement dog. This is how he got the name Cú Chulainn; the hound of Culann. On his first day after taking up arms, Cú Chulainn killed three great enemies of Ulster as well as accomplishing other superhuman feats. The Ulster exiles point out what a great danger Cú Chulainn is now at age seventeen, if he did all these deeds as a mere boy.

In a section called "Guerilla Tactics," Cú Chulainn picks off numbers of Medb's army with his sling from afar and kills individuals who try to challenge him. The Brown Bull receives a warning from the Morrígan, the battle goddess, and leaves to evade the Irish army. He is caught, but he kills fifty of Medb's warriors and escapes again. Medb then makes a deal with Cú Chulainn that she will send one warrior at a time to meet him in single combat, and he will stop killing them by the hundreds with his sling. Warrior after warrior meets Cú Chulainn and he kills them all. Meanwhile, Medb's army succeeds in bringing the Brown Bull into their camp. Cú Chulainn's divine father, Lug, arrives to help and allow Cú Chulainn to rest. Cú Chulainn sleeps for three days while three fifties of his sporting mates come from Emain Macha and successfully attack Medb's army, all dying in the process. When he awakes, Cú Chulainn undergoes the *riastradh*. This Irish word has been translated as "Warp-Spasm" by Thomas Kinsella and as "Torque" by Ciaran Carson. It is a grotesque transformation in which Cú Chulainn becomes a sort of superhuman monster with the strength of a god and a hero-light shining around his head. In his torqued state, he massacres the Irish army to avenge the young fellows from Ulster.

Fergus is then sent by Medb to meet Cú Chulainn in single combat. As Cú Chulainn's kinsman and foster-father, Fergus asks Cú Chulainn to yield before him so that they can avoid fighting. Cú Chulainn agrees, on the condition that Fergus will yield to him in the future. The next man to meet Cú Chulainn is Fer Diad, his own foster-brother from their days of training under Scáthach. Their fight lasts four days, the two men embracing each other and sending care (food or medical attention) to the other each night. On the fourth day, Cú Chulainn finally kills Fer Diad with his legendary weapon, the Gae Bolga. He then deeply mourns his friend and seems to have lost his will to fight. As the Ulstermen recover from the Curse, instances of skirmishing happen between groups of them and the Irish forces. The Ulstermen then come together into a huge army, and Medb and Ailill send Mac Roth, the herald, as a scout. He reports on the Ulster companies in great detail, and Fergus determines who each company is based on the descriptions. The final battle ensues, but Cú Chulainn is absent, recovering from his fight with Fer Diad. His charioteer, Láeg, tells him how the battle is going. Cú Chulainn is then seized by the Torque and goes to the battle to meet Fergus. Fergus yields before him, as promised, taking much of the Irish army with him. By the end of the day, Medb and Ailill must retreat. The Donn Cuailnge is brought to Connacht and engages in a legendary battle with Finnbennach the White-horned. The Brown Bull is victorious, but dies on his way back to Ulster. Peace is made between Connacht and Ulster for seven years.

Manuscripts and Stylistic Elements of the *Táin*

There are several different written versions of the *Táin* that date back to the medieval period, the authors of which are anonymous. A partial version of the story is found in *Lebor na hUidre*, or 'The Book of the Dun Cow,' which was written around 1100, but thought to be

derived from ninth century texts (Carson xiii). Another partial version exists in the fourteenth-century 'Yellow Book of Lecan,' and the twelfth-century 'Book of Leinster' presents a more unified narrative of the *Táin* (Carson xiii). Although these manuscripts were written in the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, the redaction of principal stories about Cú Chulainn, which would include the *Táin*, date back to the seventh to ninth centuries (Nutt 3).

In addition to representing multiple medieval manuscripts, the *Táin* represents several literary styles. Most notably, the narrative is a combination of prose and verse. While the events of the story are told mostly in prose, characters occasionally speak in sections of verse when foretelling future events, expressing strong emotions, or having an extended conversation with another character. In the latter case, the two characters speak sections of verse back and forth. The *Táin* also contains passages of the genre known as *rosc* (*roscada* in plural), meaning 'rhetorics' (Carson xiv). They are "continuous blocks of unpunctuated rhythmic prose, densely alliterative and syntactically ambiguous" (Carson xiv-xv). These passages have been notoriously difficult to translate, but Ciaran Carson has rendered them as sections of prose poetry, unpunctuated but with gaps between phrases to indicate ambiguity. For example:

> I know by the gaps that slaughter
> will ensue though singly they die
> by the ford one day at a time
> (Carson 114)

The *rosc* passages introduce a decidedly weighty and unsettling tone to a narrative that is at other times almost comically unbelievable.

Another key feature of the *Táin* is its attention to place-names and the stories behind them. For example, when Cú Chulainn kills four of Medb's men and impales their heads on a forked stick, Ailill asks Fergus for the name of the ford. '"Àth Grena,' said Fergus, 'the Sunny Ford. But from now on it will be called Àth Gabla, the Ford of the Fork"' (Carson 31). As

Medb's army proceeds through the Irish landscape, or as Cú Chulainn kills warriors at different fords, the *Táin* reads more as a catalogue of locations and how they were named than as an epic story. Carson proposes that we imagine the *Táin* "as a journey through a landscape, with all sorts of interesting detours to be taken off the main route" (Carson xvi-xvii). The importance given to place-names in the *Táin* speaks to the storied nature of Irish topography.

The *Táin* highlights something else about early medieval Irish society: the importance of cattle. Cattle were the basis of the medieval Irish economy. "The cow was the basic unit of wealth and an individual's social status in this rigidly hierarchical society was to a large extent dependent on the number of cows that one had at one's disposal" (McCormick 122). Relationships between land-owning lords and the tenants who worked their lands were largely based on clientship. In this system, a lord would advance a "fief," or an amount of loaned goods, to a client. Fiefs usually consisted of cattle that clients could use for their own gain while borrowing them. The client would then make annual returns of cattle and food to the lord, as a form of rent (McCormick 120). Cows were valuable to society primarily for their ability to produce food. In fact, medieval Irish law texts note that "dry cows" were only half the value of milk cows (McCormick 122). This importance of cattle is reflected throughout the *Táin.* Most obviously, the story tells of a violent and brutal war that was fought over a bull. Medb and Ailill decide to take the Donn Cuailnge by force because his owner refuses to loan him. Medb initially asks for a year's loan of the Donn Cuailnge, offering to return him at the end of the year, with fifty heifers as a fee for the loan (Gregory 140). This offer, within a literary text, highlights the practice of clientship and loans based on cattle in medieval Ireland. Cattle are also related to the violence throughout the *Táin,* as the Irish army plunders Ulster's goods and cattle as they

advance north. We are reminded of the involvement of cattle by the imagery of some of the *rosc* passages:

> enough of your threats Fergus
> on account of Ulster cows and women
> (Carson 114)
>
> rise up Ailill with your triple ranks
> against the cattle people
> (Carson 114)
>
> Fergus knows this people all too well
> bleating followers of cattle but to drive
> cattle with sharp goads
> (Carson 115)
>
> three armies wiped out by the Ulster army
> Conchobar at the heart their women huddled
> herds driven dawn after morning
> (Carson 180)

Even the food-related value of cattle is alluded to in the *Táin.* Before making the deal of daily single combat with Cú Chulainn, Medb offers him the freewomen and the dry cows from their plunder if he will stop attacking them with his sling. Cú Chulainn responds, "I can't agree to that… for if they keep the bondwomen, the freewomen will have to work at grinding grain, and if they keep the milch cows, we'll have no milk" (Carson 74).

Reception of the *Táin*

With the *Táin* itself more or less explained, I will now provide a brief introduction to the emerging field of Reception Studies and an overview of the *Táin*'s history of reception. Like many ancient tales, the *Táin* has been translated, retold, and reinterpreted many times, although it has not received as much attention as some of the more well-known epics, such as the Homeric

epics from Greece or the myriad of Arthurian tales from Britain. “Reception” is a recently established term used to refer to this practice of retelling ancient stories, foregrounded by Lorna Hardwick in the introduction to her 2003 book *Reception Studies*. She states that the function of reception studies is to analyze the migration of ancient texts into new linguistic, cultural, and contextual settings (1). Hardwick offers reception studies as an alternative to what has in the past been referred to as “the classical tradition,” or the study of “the transmission and dissemination of classical culture through the ages,” usually focusing on the influence of classical writers on later intellectual movements and individual works (Hardwick 2). By contrast, the field of reception studies focuses on “the two-way relationship between the source text or culture and the new work and receiving culture” (Hardwick 4). Reception studies seeks to use the reception of a text as a tool through which to analyze both the source and receiving cultures.

As mentioned earlier, the *Táin*’s first written forms were produced in the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. One of its earliest receptions since then is an episode entitled “The Phantom (or Demonic) Chariot of Cú Chulainn.” This tale is old enough that it is sometimes grouped with the Ulster Cycle, although it is “decidedly less archaic” (Nutt 30). In the story, Saint Patrick tries to convert the king of Ireland, Loegaire son of Niall, to Christianity. He succeeds by summoning Cú Chulainn from the grave in his chariot. Cú Chulainn tells Loegaire to believe in God, describing the pains of hell that he (Cú Chulainn) must suffer due to living and dying as a pagan (“The Phantom Chariot of Cu Chulain”). In this early reception of the *Táin*, or at least of Cú Chulainn, we see an ancient pagan hero co-opted as a proponent of Christianity. This text must have been written at a time when it was desirable to reconcile the old and new, pagan and Christian, faiths in Ireland (Nutt 30).

The Irish Cultural Revival of the early 1900s was the next time that produced notable receptions of the *Táin*. Lady Augusta Gregory adapted elements of the *Táin* in a prose narrative in English in 1902, as part of her *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*. In 1914, Joseph Dunn published the first English translation of the *Táin* from the Irish of the twelfth-century Book of Leinster (Dunn), although the English in which he writes is rather archaic. In 1969, Irish poet Thomas Kinsella produced a translation of the *Táin* that he called "the first living version of the story," a version true to its blunt and brutal Gaelic character (qtd. in Ní Bhriain 70). Kinsella's translation preserved more of the directness of the text "in bodily matters: the easy references to seduction, copulation, urination, the picking of vermin, the suggestion of incest" than did Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, which was more refined (qtd. in Ní Bhriain 70). Before his text of the *Táin*, Kinsella included eight *remscela*, or background tales, to provide context for story of the *Táin*. His version also included brush drawings by artist Louis Le Brocquy. As an artistic interpretation of the text, these drawings were themselves a reception of the *Táin* that complemented Kinsella's. The most recently produced English translation of the *Táin* is Ciaran Carson's, published in 2007. Carson's version includes no *remscela* at the beginning. Rather, Carson tells these stories in the notes to the text where they are relevant. His translation also contains more of an ironic twist, a feature of the old Irish text, than Kinsella's (O'Donoghue). Carson's ironic tone can be seen in quotes like these:

> 'tell their doctors to come and tend to Cethern Mac Fintain…' The doctors did not relish this prospect. (Carson 164)

> That night Nét's consorts… began howling at the men of Ireland, and a hundred warriors dropped dead of fright. It was not the most peaceful of nights for them. (Carson 197)

Carson's translation is the primary version to which I will be referring throughout my analysis.

There are many other instances of modern reception of the *Táin*, including the mural, tapestries and statues mentioned in the introduction. Several "Queen Maeve" beers have been inspired by Queen Medb of Connacht. In 1973, Celtic rock band Horslips recorded an album entitled "The Táin," made up of songs inspired by Thomas Kinsella's 1969 translation. These songs combine traditional Irish tunes with instruments and stylistic elements of rock, as well as lyrics recalling the plot of the *Táin*. Horslips does intervene in the story somewhat, as when "Ferdia's Song" says that Fer Diad simply laughed when Cú Chulainn threatened him with his strength, and when "Faster Than the Hound" implies that Mac Roth, the herald, loved Medb ("The Táin"). However, they also preserve a bit of the ironic character of the text. This can be seen in the song about the Donn Cuailnge, the fierce brown bull, whose title, "Charolais," refers to a "gentle" breed of domestic cow ("The Táin"). "Charolais" also recalls the motif of cattle in the *Táin* and the importance of cattle to early Irish society. In 1992, during the end of the Troubles with Northern Ireland, a small loyalist paramilitary group that called itself the "Red Branch Knights" claimed responsibility for incendiary devices, a blast bomb, and threatening statements against those linked to the Republic of Ireland (Melaugh). The name of the organization references the Red Branch, one of the royal houses of King Conchobar at Emain Macha. This shows an appropriation of the mythology around Ulster warriors for the purpose of modern violence. There are also several examples of contemporary poetry inspired by the *Táin,* (one of which we will be examining in detail later on), as well as a web comic version of the story, called "The Cattle Raid of Cooley," by Irish comic artist Patrick Brown. We will now turn our attention specifically to one of the most influential examples from this history of reception: *Cuchulain of Muirthemne,* by Lady Augusta Gregory.

Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* and its Formal Variations

In 1902, Lady Augusta Gregory published *Cuchulain of Muirthemne,* which can be read as a consolidation and retelling of numerous early Irish tales about Cú Chulainn and the warriors of Ulster. We will first examine the key formal and stylistic elements of Lady Gregory's text and how they differ from those of Carson's translation. For example, while the *Táin* is an epic story about a single event, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* tells the key events of the life of one person, Cú Chulainn. In her work, Lady Gregory creates a biography of Cú Chulainn out of old Irish tales translated into English, including the *Táin*. Although Cú Chulainn is usually understood to be the hero of the *Táin,* this is not immediately clear upon the first reading of that text. While reading the opening section of the *Táin,* it would not be hard to assume, for instance, that Ailill and Medb are the epic's protagonists, because the story begins with them and their conflicts and goals. More than on individual heroes, the *Táin* is focused on the events that take place, the tension between provinces of Ireland, and the social codes upheld or broken by the characters. In *Cuchulain of Muirthemne,* instead, Lady Gregory switches the focus to the life and exploits of one hero. In her retelling of these stories, she makes changes to facilitate this biographical style, as well as to increase readability of the tales for the Irish public.

In some instances, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* rearranges the order of the stories to be chronological or to provide backstory where convenient. For example, Lady Gregory places the story of the boyhood deeds of Cú Chulainn, which is a part of the *Táin*, directly after the story of his birth (Gregory 6). She places the rest of the events of the *Táin* much later in her work, to reflect the chronological moment in Cú Chulainn's life at which they occur. She divides the stories of the *Táin* to better fit the telling of a biography. She also occasionally includes background stories in the narrative to provide context for the events she is currently recounting.

These are the types of prefatory stories, called *remscela*, that Thomas Kinsella included before his translation of the *Táin* and that Ciaran Carson retold in the notes to his. In *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, when Medb talks to the poet Fedelm about the fate of her army, she mentions that the Ulstermen are currently lying in weakness (Gregory 144). Lady Gregory writes,

> Now, when Maeve told Fedelm of the Sidhe that there need be no fear of the men of Ulster coming out to attack the army, for they were lying in their weakness, she meant that they were under the curse and the enchantment that was put on them one time by a woman they had ill-treated. And the story of it is this: (Gregory 145)

She goes on in the next three pages to tell the story of how the Ulstermen acquired the Curse, then returns to the narrative of "The War for the Bull of Cuailnge." At the end of the *Táin*, the two bulls engage in an epic fight. In *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, Lady Gregory prefaces this episode with the story of how the bulls came to be bitter enemies: "This, now, is the story of the two bulls, the Brown of Cuailnge, and the White-horned of Cruachan Ai, and this is the way it was with them—for they were not right bulls, but there was enchantment on them" (Gregory 211). She recounts the bulls' history as fairy swineherds, forever dueling with each other, and then finishes her chapter with the legendary fight of the bulls as told in the *Táin*. These *remscela* of the Ulster Curse and of the two bulls are not told in the *Táin*. Lady Gregory includes them at strategic points in her narrative to provide context and increase understanding of the stories she is retelling.

As mentioned above, one of the most particular stylistic elements of the *Táin* is its combination of prose and verse, including the especially unique *roscada*. In her retelling of the *Táin* however, Lady Gregory translates the verse sections in the same prose she uses for the rest of the narrative. If someone read *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* before reading any other translations of the *Táin*, they would have no way of knowing that separate prose and verse passages existed in the old Irish versions of the text. The difference can be clearly seen in comparing *Cuchulain of*

Muirthemne to Ciaran Carson's *Táin,* which does translate the prose and verse sections differently. When rendering Fedelm's prophecy to Medb of the suffering her army will undergo at the hands of Cú Chulainn, for example, Carson writes,

> I see a forceful blond man,
> on whom victories are built.
> A fierce light springs from his head,
> wounds hang on him like a belt…
>
> Blood spurts from soldiers' bodies,
> released by this hero's hand.
> He kills on sight, scattering
> Deda's followers and clan.
> Women wail at the corpse-mound
> because of him—the Forge-Hound
> (Carson 13-15)

The long verse section from which this quote is taken, like all of Carson's verse sections, is written in distinctly formatted poetic stanzas, with different margins than the prose of the rest of the narrative. In her version of Fedelm's prophecy, Lady Gregory writes,

> [I see] a low-sized man doing many deeds of arms; there are many wounds on his smooth skin; there is a light about his head, there is victory on his forehead… the memory of the blood shed by him will be lasting; women will be keening over the bodies brought low by the Hound of the Forge that I see before me. (Gregory 144-145)

This quote is not differentiated from the rest of the text, but completely flush with Lady Gregory's prose. The Morrígan's warning to the Brown Bull, which is a *rosc* passage, is translated (in part) by Carson as such:

> restless does the Dark Bull know death-dealing slaughter
> secret that the raven wrings from writhing soldiers
> as the Dark One grazes… the raven struts on corpses
> war-clouds raging over Cúailnge day and night
> kith and kin lie down to join the tribes of dead
> (Carson 57)

At this point in Lady Gregory's version of the story, the Morrígan says simply this: "Have a care, and keep a good watch, my poor bull, or the men of Ireland will come on you and will drive you away to their camp" (Gregory 155). Lady Gregory's elimination of the verse style in the *Táin* makes her text more readable, more easily accessible, to the public. The verse and *rosc* passages are easy to appreciate in a literary sense, for the uniqueness and artistic depth that they bring to the story. However, for a first-time reader of the *Táin*, these passages are likely to produce confusion and create distance between the reader and the text. If Lady Gregory wanted to prevent this in the experiences of her readers, it makes sense that she chose to neutralize the verse.

Something else that Lady Gregory attempts to neutralize in *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* is the blunt, bodily character of the Irish text of the *Táin*. Kinsella and Carson however, in their later translations, both try to preserve this bluntness. For example, when Medb sends a messenger to offer terms to Cú Chulainn, Carson writes, "Cú Chulainn was sitting thigh-deep in the snow, without a stitch on, picking lice from his shirt. Mac Roth asked whom he served under" (Carson 73-74). Lady Gregory meanwhile mentions neither Cú Chulainn's nakedness or picking of lice (Gregory 158). Several times in the *Táin*, Medb seems to offer herself sexually as part of her bribing warriors to fight Cú Chulainn. She says, in Carson's version, "I'll grant him a piece of the smooth plain of Aí as big as all his lands, and a chariot worth thrice seven bondmaids, as well as the friendship of my own thighs" (Carson 6). In Lady Gregory's translation, Medb says, "I will give him the equal of his own lands on the smooth plain of Ai, and a chariot that is worth three times seven serving-maids, and my own close friendship along with that" (Gregory 140). But perhaps the most noticeable difference in terms of bodily bluntness between *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* and the *Táin* is Cú Chulainn's transformation, the

riastradh. Carson's translation describes the Torque in terms so spectacular as to merit a near full-length citation of the passage:

> Every slab and every sinew of him, joint and muscle, shuddered from head to foot like a tree in the storm or a reed in the stream. His body revolved furiously inside his skin. His feet and his shins and his knees jumped to the back; his heels and his calves and his hams to the front. The bunched sinews of his calves jumped to the front of his shins, bulging with knots the size of a warrior's clenched fist. The ropes of his neck rippled from ear to nape in immense, monstrous, incalculable knobs, each as big as the head of a month-old child.
>
> Then he made a red cauldron of his face and features: he sucked one of his eyes so deep into his head that a wild crane would find it difficult to plumb the depths of his skull to drag that eye back to its socket; the other popped out on to his cheek. His mouth became a terrifying, twisted grin. His cheek peeled back from his jaws so you could see lungs and liver flapping in his throat; lower and upper palate clashed like a pair of mighty tongs, and a stream of white-hot flecks broad as a ram's fleece poured from his mouth. His heart belled against his ribs like a bloodhound guldering for its food... His hair became the wiry tangle of a red thornbush that fences a gap in a stone wall. If a royal apple-tree laden with regal fruit were shaken over his head, hardly an apple would reach the ground, but would find itself spiked by a strand of his hair as it bristled with rage. The hero's light sprang from his forehead, long and thick as a warrior's whetstone... Then thick, steady, strong, high as the mast of a tall ship was the straight spout of dark blood that rose up from the fount of his skull to dissolve in an otherworldly mist like the smoke that hangs above a royal hunting-lodge when a king comes to be looked after at the close of a winter's day. (Carson 109)

This passage is remarkable for several reasons. The first stylistic aspect that one notices is the grotesque physicality of the descriptions. The images produced of Cú Chulainn's body are horrifying—perhaps to show off the storyteller's skill in describing and amplifying physical details. These details are so potent that one may miss a more subtle characteristic of the passage—it employs a substantial amount of figurative language, enriching the imagery of Cú Chulainn. For example, there are comparisons to illustrate size: "knots the size of a warrior's clenched fist" and "each as big as the head of a month-old child". These two quotes evoke parts of the body, thus fitting thematically with the rest of the passage. Other size comparisons,

however, introduce entirely new images, from the natural world or of cultural objects, into the reader's mind. For example, "a stream of white-hot flecks broad as a ram's fleece," "long and thick as a warrior's whetstone" and "steady, strong, high as the mast of a tall ship." There are also similes and metaphors (a little more figurative than size comparisons) that produce images unrelated to the body: "Then he made a red cauldron of his face and features," "lower and upper palate clashed like a pair of mighty tongs" and "belled against his ribs like a bloodhound guldering for its food." These last few examples all seem to relate to a kitchen setting, and all add to the violent mood of the passage. In other cases, however, the similes and metaphors are quite poetic, introducing unexpectedly pleasant imagery into this terrifying description. For example, "shuddered from head to foot like a tree in the storm or a reed in the stream," "His hair became the wiry tangle of a red thornbush that fences a gap in a stone wall," "an otherworldly mist like the smoke that hangs above a royal hunting-lodge when a king comes to be looked after at the close of a winter's day." These poetic comparisons create some interesting dissonance between the pleasant images that they produce and the grotesque, bodily process that they describe.

This dissonance, as well as the focus on the body, is not replicated by Lady Gregory, who simply writes the following about Cú Chulainn's *riastradh*: "He went out then against the men of Ireland, and attacked them, and his anger came on him, so that it was not his own appearance he had on him, but the appearance of a god" (Gregory 170). Lady Gregory eliminates the whole bodily description of Cú Chulainn's transformation. She also translates "*riastradh*" as "anger," leaving it uncapitalized. This implies more of an emotional than a physical process, unlike the words "Torque" and "Warp-Spasm". Saying simply that Cú Chulainn has the appearance of a god conveys the power and might of the *riastradh*, but none of the grotesqueness. However, the

Torque in Carson's translation of the *Táin* is another detail that can provoke confusion and distance from the text in a first-time reader. Lady Gregory cleans up many of the shocking and bodily details of the *Táin* as a way to increase the readability of the story.

Lady Gregory also increases readability by translating or explaining certain Irish words and names. For example, when describing Ailill's and Medb's court at Cruachan in Connacht, she writes,

> Seven sons Ailell and Maeve had, and the name of every one of them was Maine. There was Maine Mathremail, like his mother, and Maine Athramail, like his father, and Maine Mo Epert, the Talker, and Maine Milscothach, the Honey-Worded, and Maine Andoe the Quick, and Maine Mingor, the Gently Dutiful, and Maine Morgor, the Very Dutiful. (Gregory 116)

Earlier in the text, Conchobar mentions his "great sword, the Gorm Glas, the Blue Green" (Gregory 101). Later, a man is mentioned, named "Eocho Rond, that is, Eocho of the Gold Chain" (Gregory 233). The medieval old Irish versions of the *Táin* would not have needed to spell out what these names meant. Lady Gregory chooses to explain them to help her readers get more understanding out of the narrative. When Fiacha, an exiled Ulsterman, betrays the Irish army by helping Cú Chulainn defeat the sons of Calatin, Cú Chulainn promises that no one will be left to reveal his betrayal.

> With that he made an attack on Calatin and his sons… Only one man of them, Glas, son of Delga, got away and ran, but Cuchulain rushed after him and gave him a great blow. But he got as far as Ailell and Maeve's tent, and all he could say was, "Fiacha! Fiacha!" before he fell dead. Fergus and Maeve said, "What debts are those he called out about?"—for Fiacha is the word for a debt in Irish. (Gregory 174)

Again, this play on words would not have had to be explained in the Irish versions of the text. Lady Gregory adds a brief explanation for the sake of humor and understanding.

Another feature of the *Táin* is its occasional long list or catalogue sections.[2] These lists or catalogues can take up pages at a time without seeming to progress the plot of the story forward. For example, the second chapter of Carson's *Táin* ends with a two-page, monotonous list describing the route that the army takes to Ulster:

> through Findglassa Assail, Assal's Clear Stream, through Drong, the Tribe, through Delt, through Duelt, through Deland, through Selach, through Slabra, the Chain, through Slechta, the Cut, where they cut their way through, through Cúl, the Backwater, of Siblinne, by Dub, the Blackwater…(Carson 16)

In *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, Lady Gregory skips this entire list. Before the final battle, when the Ulstermen have arisen from the Curse, Conchobar gives orders to Finnchad, telling him whom to go and ask for help with the battle. These orders take up more than a page in Carson's *Táin* and are essentially a very long list of names:

> Go to Dedad in his inlet, to Leamain, to Fallach, to Illann Mac Fergusa, to Gabar, to Dorlunsa, to Imchlár, to Feidlimid Cilair Cétaig, to Fáeladán, to Rochaid Mac Faithemain at Rigdonn, to Lugaid, to Lugda, to Cathbath in his inlet, to the three Cairpres, to Aela, to Láeg at his causeway, to Geimen in his valley, to Senoll Úathach at Diabul Arda…(Carson 177-178)

Lady Gregory's telling of Finnchad's orders are as follows:

> Then he called to one of his messengers, Finnched… and he bade him to go and to call out the men of Ulster. But with the sleep that was on him still, and the weakness, he bade him go and call those of his people that were dead, as well as those that were living. And one of the names he gave him to call was Cuchulain, son of Sualtim. (Gregory 200)

Lady Gregory takes out the long list of names, which admittedly does not add much to the story for the average reader, and only mentions by name the character that everyone knows at this

[2] Catalogues in ancient epic narratives often play the role of collective and poetic archives. The catalogues in the *Táin* are very stylistically similar to the Catalogue of Ships in Book 2 of the *Iliad*, to take a comparison from Homer. Both present sheer numbers of places, people, or units of warriors (ships or companies). This may have served to make concrete the numbers claimed to be present, persuade the audience that these places or people actually existed (in explicitly naming them), and foster pride in the audience who may have heard specific reference to their hometown or ancestor (Gaertner 302).

point; Cú Chulainn. This also ties back to her biographical focus on Cú Chulainn in her text. She tells (for the most part) only tales that pertain to Cú Chulainn, and she mentions only Cú Chulainn out of a page-long list of warriors. The section of the *Táin* that perhaps most merits designation as a catalogue is the description of the Ulster army coming together. In this section, Mac Roth, the herald, reports to Ailill and Medb about the companies of Ulster warriors he has seen while scouting. Fergus, an exiled Ulsterman, determines who each company is based on Mac Roth's detailed descriptions. This section occupies almost eight pages in Carson's translation of the *Táin* and includes descriptions of twenty different companies. In *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, it takes up about three pages and describes only eight companies. One of these companies is reported in Carson's version as follows:

> 'Another company came to the hill at Slane in Meath,' said Mac Roth, 'countless numbers of heroes wearing strange outfits, very different to the other companies. With all their gear and weapons and equipment they made a marvellous spectacle as they advanced. They were an army in themselves. At their head was a bright-faced, freckled, perfectly formed little boy. He held a gold-studded, gold-rimmed shield with a white boss and a shimmering, keen-bladed light javelin. He wore a red-embroidered white hooded tunic and a purple fringed cloak held at the breast with a silver pin. A gold-hilted sword sat proud against his garments.' (Carson 191-192)

Lady Gregory's description of the same company is as follows:

> "I saw another troop coming," said Mac Roth, "wild-looking, and in the middle of it a young little lad, red and freckled. He had a silk shirt on him with a border of red gold, and a shield faced with gold, with a golden rim, and a little bright gold sword at his side." (Gregory 205)

Lady Gregory not only removes more than half the companies from the catalogue, but also pares down the descriptions of each. These changes in form and style that Lady Gregory makes seem on the whole to be attempts at increased readability or at neutralization of the more bizarre or

unsavory elements of the old Irish text of the *Táin*. In the next section, I will propose a critical and historical reading of Lady Gregory's decisions.

The Paradox of Modern Irishness

As we have seen, Lady Gregory changes or eliminates many unique aspects of the old Irish versions of the *Táin* in *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*. She turns the epic into a biography. She rearranges the order of the stories and *remscela* to be chronological or to provide convenient backstory. Eliminating the verse and *rosc* passages, she tells the whole of her work in plain prose. She censors and neutralizes many blunt, bodily references in the *Táin*. She provides translations of some of the Irish names and removes or drastically shortens the list and catalogue sections. As I commented above, all these changes make the text more readable and accessible to an audience of the general Irish public. However, readability hardly seems to be enough to explain Lady Gregory's changes. In her dedication, she indicates that her goal with *Cuchuclain of Muirthemne* is to recover old Irish stories for the enjoyment of the people, and Yeats in his preface to her work hails it for telling the old stories "perfectly for the first time" (Yeats iii). How could the two of them hold up *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* as a shining example of recovered Irishness when Lady Gregory changed so much of the old Gaelic character of the text?

This question is deeply entrenched in the historical moment of early 1900s Ireland, when *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* was published. In the chapter "The Irish Paradigm" of her book *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova describes the phenomenon known as the Irish Literary Revival, which took place roughly between 1890 and 1930 (304). During this time, Ireland was seeking to define itself as a cultural entity distinct from England. Like in many nations fighting centuries of influence by a colonial power, Ireland's push for a national identity

began with literature (Casanova 304). Yeats and other writers sought to establish a national literature to differentiate Ireland from England and cement an Irish national identity. According to Casanova,

> a group of intellectuals, Anglo-Irish for the most part—William Butler Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory, Edward Martyn, and George Moore to begin with; then George Russell…Padraic Colum, John Millington Synge (whom Yeats was to meet in Paris), and James Stephens—undertook to manufacture a national literature out of oral practices, collecting, transcribing, translating, and rewriting Celtic tales and legends. (305)

They invented modern Irishness in a process of working to create a national literature, but hiding the process to make the product appear naturally and historically evident. They began by turning to literature of the past, namely early Irish stories and folktales, exemplified by Lady Gregory with *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*. At the same time though, Yeats in particular was focused on establishing a tradition of theater: "from 1899 to 1911 he worked to create a distinctively Irish theater, conceived both as the privileged instrument for communicating a national literature and as a pedagogical tool for educating the Irish people" (Casanova 306). With Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn, Yeats founded the Irish Literary Theater in Dublin in 1899, later renamed the Irish National Theater. He claimed that their movement was to return to the people through a "revival" of folk art (Casanova 306). As these intellectuals were engaged in a project of inventing Irish literature in English, The Gaelic League, founded in 1893, was promoting a national language "to put an end to the linguistic and cultural ascendancy of the English colonizer" (Casanova 307). These scholars and writers, mainly Catholic intellectuals like Patrick Pearse and Padraic O'Conaire, aimed to reestablish Gaelic as the primary language of Ireland. Lady Gregory's decisions in *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* must be placed on the political and cultural backdrop of the Irish Literary Revival in order to be understood fully.

Casanova states that the Irish Literary Revival sought "to give popular narratives and legends literary stature, ennobled through poetry and drama" (305). Lady Gregory wanted to ennoble the old stories she was retelling, to turn them into literature. This could be an explanation for why she made the changes she did. Perhaps she thought the elite literary circles of 1902 would not respect a text like the medieval versions of the *Táin,* with all their quirks and bluntness. Casanova also mentions that "the version of the legend of Cuchulain was often reworked, thus making this character into a model of national heroism" (306). As an incarnation of the grandeur of the Irish, Cú Chulainn had to be cleaned up, so to speak. To make him a fitting international diplomat of Ireland, Lady Gregory did away with his nakedness, lice picking and monstrous Torque transformation. The importance of Cú Chulainn and the *Táin* as international representations of Irishness can also be felt in Yeats' attitude toward *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*. In his preface to the work, he writes,

> Lady Gregory has done her work of compression and selection at once so firmly and so reverently that I cannot believe that anybody, except now and then for a scientific purpose, will need another text than this, or than the version of it the Gaelic League is about to publish in Modern Irish. When she has added her translations from other cycles, she will have given Ireland its *Mabinogion*, its *Morte d'Arthur*, its *Nibelungenlied*. (Yeats iii)

Here, Yeats implies that old Irish stories can and should be elevated to the status of national epic. In comparing Gregory's work to other such epics, he clearly expresses what he wants for Ireland: a great literary work from a past heroic age that will bind the people to a common history and national identity. But for this to happen, the Irish epic must be on literary par with the others, or at least similar in style. This is perhaps another reason for Lady Gregory's edits to the texts of the *Táin*. The *Mabinogion* is a collection of eleven medieval Welsh tales based on mythology, folklore and heroic legends ("Mabinogion"). *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* is also a collection of

tales with similar roots in mythology and legends. The *Morte d'Arthur*, by Sir Thomas Malory, is the first English-language prose version of the Arthurian legend. It is in fact a collection of stories, translated and compiled by Malory in chronological sequence from the birth of Arthur (Bryan viii-ix). Similarly, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* is one of the first English-language prose versions of early Irish tales, and it retells stories about Cú Chulainn in chronological sequence, starting with his birth. The *Nibelungenlied* is a Middle High German epic poem written around 1200, drawing on stories that go back to the fifth or sixth century, including the Volsunga Saga and other Icelandic works (Dirda X-XI). According to Encyclopedia Britannica, "the *Nibelungenlied* appears to be not a mere joining of individual stories but rather an integration of component elements into a meaningful whole." This is precisely what Lady Gregory has aimed to do in *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*. In mentioning these other famous national epics, Yeats makes clear that he wants a similar source of national pride for Ireland. But with the specific examples he chooses, he is also justifying the nature of Lady Gregory's text and her choice of formatting. She has aimed to put old Irish stories, including the *Táin*, on literary and stylistic par with other celebrated national epics.

The quote from Yeats also refers to the Gaelic League's version of Lady Gregory's work in Modern Irish. This means, somewhat paradoxically, that with her work, Lady Gregory created modern "Irishness" in English, to then have it translated back into Irish. This phenomenon highlights the modernness of the Irish literary revival. Yeats and Gregory, along with their compatriots, wrote under the assumption that their work was an act of retrieving and salvaging an old and precarious "Irishness." But in order for Gregory to do this, she had to translate Irish into English. This was part of ennobling the old stories by making them more literary and respectable, more accessible. Just as the character of Cú Chulainn had to act as an international

diplomat for Ireland, so did the language in which his stories were presented. In modern times, English is used more widely than Irish, particularly in international exchanges. Therefore, though they claimed to be bringing back and preserving Irishness, Yeats and Gregory depended on English to do so. Lady Gregory's struggle between old Irishness and modernity can also be seen symptomatized in her translations of some Irish names (e.g., "Eocho Rond, that is, Eocho of the Gold Chain" (Gregory 233)). I asserted above that Gregory translates these names into English to increase the understanding and enjoyment of her audience. While I do believe that this is the case, it is not the entire picture. Why would Lady Gregory not simply report these names in English? In the medieval versions, the names were written in the same language as the rest of the text. A reader of Irish would not have needed an explanation. Gregory's readers would have understood perfectly well if she had written "Eocho of the Gold Chain" and left out "Eocho Rond" altogether, but she instead reports each name twice. This is because the inclusion of the Irish names helps to preserve a sense of Irishness in the text. It serves to remind the reader that they are reading an old Irish story, even though, ironically, the very act of saying the names twice changes the old Irish.

In his preface to *Cuchulain of Muirthemne,* Yeats alludes to the idea of storytelling or "the storyteller." He writes, "One does not perhaps exaggerate when one says that no story has come down to us in the form it had when the storyteller told it in the winter evenings" (Yeats iii). In turn, in her dedication of the work, Lady Gregory writes, "I have told the whole story in plain and simple words, in the same way my old nurse, Mary Sheridan used to be telling stories from the Irish long ago, and I a child at Roxborough" (Gregory i). Yeats and Gregory both romanticize the oral tradition of storytelling over the textual tradition of the *Táin,* and in a way, Gregory's style is an attempt to recreate this oral tradition in her work. She remembers the way Irish stories

were told to her as a child, while Yeats imagines how the stories would have been told "in the winter evenings," perhaps by royal storytellers in the courts of kings, before the stories were written down in the Middle Ages. Thus, even though both authors are invested in the orality of the *Táin*, there is a degree of tension between the ways in which they each think about that orality. While Yeats implies that this oral tradition is irretrievable, Gregory claims to have a link to it through her old nurse and to have reconstructed it successfully.[3] This attempt to recreate the old oral tradition may explain some of the changes Lady Gregory made to the Irish texts. An old nurse telling Irish stories to children likely would not orally reproduce passages of verse or long lists of Irish names and places. Similarly, Yeats fancies that the old Irish storytellers probably adjusted and took liberties with the tales they were telling as they told them. This is what Lady Gregory has done in *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*. In fact, Yeats even implies that it is in the nature of the Irish to change and adapt their own stories:

> His art, too, is often at its greatest when it is most extravagant, for he only feels himself among solid things, among things with fixed laws and satisfying purposes, when he has reshaped the world according to his heart's desire. He understands as well as Blake that the ruins of time build mansions in eternity, and he never allows anything, that we can see and handle, to remain long unchanged. (Yeats vii)

Yeats' sweeping generalizations are clear signs of his desire to create a national sentiment among the Irish. He romanticizes Irishness itself, which he, Lady Gregory and others were actively creating during the Irish Literary Revival.

This process can also be seen in the phenomenon of the Kiltartan dialect, or Kiltartanese. This was what the modern scholars of the Irish Cultural Revival called the "language of the people," despite the fact that it was partially created by these very scholars. Because she was

[3] This tension between Yeats' and Gregory's ideas of the old Irish oral tradition is one clue into the artificiality of the Irishness that they were inventing.

writing for English-speaking audiences, Lady Gregory "attempted to capture the Irish-influenced speech patterns of the Irish peasantry in English," in the "linguistic compromise" of Kiltartanese (Hallissy 57). The dialect can be described as English spoken with some Gaelic syntax, and it was named after the area surrounding Lady Gregory's home at Coole Park (Hallissy 58). Yeats praises the flow of Gregory's language in his preface to *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*:

> Lady Gregory has discovered a speech as beautiful as that of Morris[4], and a living speech into the bargain.
>
> As she moved about among her people she learned to love the beautiful speech of those who think in Irish, and to understand that it is as true a dialect of English as the dialect that Burns wrote in. It is some hundreds of years old, and age gives a language authority. (Yeats iv)

But despite the praise it received among scholars of the Irish Literary Revival, Kiltartanese is now sometimes referenced disparagingly, to imply a patronizing falsity (Oxford Reference). It represents the need to create a modern Irishness that looks old. This anxiety can be seen in the quote above, in which Yeats feels the need to justify Kiltartanese as a true dialect of English. He also vaguely asserts that it is "some hundreds of years old," and helpfully points out that "age gives a language authority." He wants Gregory's Kiltartanese to have authority in the literary circles of Ireland and the world. The dialect in which Lady Gregory writes, along with her claim to a link with the old oral tradition of Ireland (through her old nurse), highlights the modernity of her text. Both the "popular" dialect and the references to oral tradition appeal to nostalgia, which is a very modern sentiment. Nostalgia spurs the desire to create a present that looks like the past. Cultural and historical nostalgia of this sort is also apparent in modern Celtic festivals and other such events.

[4] William Morris (1834-1896), English artist and author whose epic poem *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* (1876) retells Old Norse medieval prose sagas ("William Morris").

Perhaps Lady Gregory felt authorized to change so much from the old versions of the *Táin* because those medieval texts did not represent "Irishness" at the time. With *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, Lady Gregory was inventing Irishness, not unearthing it. According to Yeats, "Folk art is, indeed, the oldest of the aristocracies of thought… it is the soil where all great art is rooted" (qtd. in Casanova 306). To understand why Lady Gregory changed or removed so many aspects of the Gaelic texts of her stories, perhaps we need to think of those old Irish tales as the soil in which her "great art," *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, is rooted. Irish identity was something that people like Yeats and Gregory were creating, not something that already existed and that was tied to old Irish versions of the *Táin*. Nevertheless, these writers took pains to present what they were creating as something revived or recovered. There is a reason, after all, why the movement was called the Irish Literary Revival and not the Irish Literary Invention. The Irish intellectuals of this movement claimed to be bringing something back from the dead, but their nostalgia for the Irish past was a mark of their modernity. They were fighting for an Irish identity inspired by the past, but also for a place in the world republic of letters[5], requiring their literature to be relevant in an international modern day.

Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* can therefore be used as a case study through which to examine the larger tensions, anxieties, and cultural forces at play in Ireland during the early twentieth century. To understand this, it is necessary to consider both Ireland's international present and colonial past. Ireland needed a place in the world republic of letters, to be respected internationally as a nation with its own national literature. At the same time, Ireland

[5] Casanova defines the "république mondiale des lettres" as "world literary space—that alone is capable of giving meaning and coherence to the very form of individual texts. This space is not an abstract and theoretical construction, but an actual—albeit unseen—world made up by lands of literature; a world in which what is judged worthy of being considered literary is brought into existence; a world in which the ways and means of literary art are argued over and decided" (3-4).

wished to distance itself from its colonial past by distinguishing its national identity from that of England. To do this, writers sought to recover from the past what they thought was uniquely Irish—Ireland's folklore, legends and oral tradition—while also modernizing this past for the international present. By comparing the *Táin* with *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* and analyzing the changes that Lady Gregory chose to make to the older versions of the story, we can see how her adaptation symptomatizes the anxieties and contradictions of modern Irishness.

Patrick Hicks' "Reading the Táin": A Case Study of Cú Chulainn in Contemporary Irish Poetry

Nostalgia for the Irish past by no means ended with the Irish Literary Revival, as can even be seen in the most recent English translation of the *Táin.* As we saw earlier in the preface to *Cuchulain of Muirthemne,* Lady Gregory claims to have a last remnant of the oral tradition through her Irish nurse. Such a link is also invoked by Ciaran Carson in the introduction to his 2007 translation of the *Táin*:

> I once had the privilege of accompanying the late Paddy Tunney on a car journey through his native County Fermanagh. Known as 'The Man of Songs', Tunney was a living thesaurus of stories, songs, poems and recitations, and as we drove through this townland or that… by this lake or that river or wellhead, he would relate their history, lilt an accompanying reel or jig, or sing snatches of the songs that sprang from that source, and tell stories of the remarkable characters who once dwelt there. I have no idea how many thousands of words were thus encompassed in that extraordinary memory of his, but I do know that for him place, story and song were intimately and dynamically connected, and that his landscape spoke volumes. (Carson xvi)

Notice that here, Carson claims a connection, however fleeting, to the old oral tradition of Ireland. Paddy Tunney for him is the equivalent of nurse Mary Sheridan for Lady Gregory, and the fact that both these people are now deceased is also important. Gregory and Carson hint that the oral tradition itself is in danger of dying out, but that one may perhaps find a remnant of it in

their texts. Evoking the Irish past in literature is also a common practice in contemporary poetry. We will finish our examination of reception of the *Táin* with a close reading of a 2007 poem: "Reading the Táin," by Patrick Hicks.

Patrick Hicks is an Irish American writer and poet (with dual citizenship) who is currently the Writer-in-Residence at Augustana University and a faculty member at Sierra Nevada University ("About Patrick"). His poem "Reading the Táin" was published in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* in the fall of 2007. Below is the full piece:

Reading the Táin

"You would do for looking after men of poetry,
but you are a little young still for dealing with men of war."
- from *Táin Bó Cuailnge*[6]

So said Conall to Cúchulainn,
that bull watcher, hound splitter, chariot crusher.
Late in my education, he has come to me.
Achilles and Beowulf are dust,
Troy and Jutland, replaced by Ulster.
How odd, because Irish monks, those early scribes,
helped save that Greek and the Scandinavian.

Hunched over vellum, aiming the arrowtip of a quill,
these men lettered the lifeblood of literature.
With crushed pigment and beeswax,
they dreamed myth onto stretched calfskin,
they sacrificed flesh for the love of words.
Had they known that other legends
would one day overwhelm Cúchulainn
and the brown bull of Cuailnge,
would they, these men of poetry,
invite the bull watcher to safeguard
their herds of precious calfskin?

[6] This version of the quote is from Thomas Kinsella's 1969 translation of the *Táin* (Kinsella 80).

Would they warn him that foreign men –
warriors with strange names and gods –
were riding to the Battlefield of Vellum,
that ink would flow like blood?
Knowing this, young Cúchulainn
might scan the morning horizon,
sword in his fist, he stands now,
waiting for the world to be written.

Patrick Hicks

Hicks begins his poem with a quote from the *Táin*. In Ciaran Carson's translation, the quote is '"You'd just about do," said Conall, "for taking care of someone who comes with poetry, but if it comes to fighting, you're a little young" (Carson 45). This quote is from the section of the *Táin* called "The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn," and it is said after Cú Chulainn takes up arms for the first time and has a charioteer drive him around Ulster so he can show off his skills. After Conall tells Cú Chulainn that he is too young for fighting, Cú Chulainn goes out and kills the three sons of Nechta Scéne, "who say the Ulstermen they've killed outnumber those who are alive" (Carson 46). He demonstrates immediately that he is in fact ready for men of war. Hicks includes this quote before the start of his poem to preface the comparison that the poem will later make between men of poetry and men of war.

In the first stanza, Hicks explains who said the quote and to whom. He then, in line 2, gives Cú Chulainn a few epithets: "bull watcher" (referencing how Cú Chulainn tries to prevent Medb and her army from taking the Donn Cuailnge), "hound splitter" (recalling how Cú Chulainn got his name—by killing a hound with his hurley ball and then smashing it against a stone), and "chariot crusher" (referencing Cú Chulainn's taking up of arms, when he broke twelve chariots before Conchobar's own chariot was given to him). These epithets solidify Cú Chulainn's status as an epic hero, like Greek heroes in the Homeric epics, each with their own

epithets (e.g. red-haired Menelaus, Achilles of the swift feet, horse-taming Hector[7]). Hicks then brings his own voice into the poem in line 3, specifying that he learned about Cú Chulainn only late in his education. This statement acts as advance evidence for the sentiment later in the poem that Cú Chulainn and the *Táin* have been overwhelmed by other heroes and epics in public awareness and appreciation. This is why Hicks has only met Cú Chulainn "late" in his career. Lines 4 and 5 of the poem ("Achilles and Beowulf are dust, / Troy and Jutland, replaced by Ulster") signify that though they came to Hicks later, Cú Chulainn and the *Táin* have taken precedence in his mind over more well-known epics like the *Iliad* and *Beowulf*, represented by "Achilles and Beowulf…Troy and Jutland." Hicks then muses that this is ironic, because Irish monks helped preserve Greek and Scandinavian stories as well as those of their own country. This assertion is open to intense historical debate,[8] but Hicks' inclusion of it contributes to his romanticization of medieval Irish monks and the important literary work they did.

In the second stanza, Hicks begins comparing medieval writing to fighting. He mentions vellum in line 8, which is stretched-out calfskin that was used as paper in the medieval period. He then says, "aiming the arrowtip of a quill." This line directly compares a writing implement to a medieval weapon, implying that writing during the Middle Ages was as risky and important an endeavor as fighting. The next (alliterative) line, "these men lettered the lifeblood of literature," stresses again the importance of what these medieval scribes did, as well as producing imagery of blood. Instead of violence however, the reference to "lifeblood" evokes vitality. This

[7] From Homer's *Iliad.*

[8] We know from Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* ("Ecclesiatical History of the English People," finished around the year 731) that Theodore of Tarsus and Hadrian of North Africa traveled to England in the seventh century and taught Greek and Latin to English monks, but we do not know how long this knowledge of Greek lasted or whether it spread to Ireland. There have been many comparisons between the *Táin* and the *Iliad*, and Cú Chulainn and Achilles. The works and heroes do seem similar, but is this because the medieval writers of the *Táin* knew the *Iliad*, or was it coincidence? Unfortunately, it is all speculation. This information was summarized for me in a personal communication with Dr. Mary Valante on 12 October 2020.

sets up writing as a counterpoint to fighting—an important and noble occupation that enhances and preserves life rather than destroying it. In lines 10 and 11, Hicks mentions "crushed pigment and beeswax" and "stretched calfskin," producing material images of what monks had to use for their art and reminding the reader that writing in the Middle Ages was a difficult process requiring physical skill. With the phrase "they dreamed myth onto stretched calfskin," Hicks romanticizes the attitudes of the monks who wrote down stories like the *Táin*. Line 12, "they sacrificed flesh for the love of words," abounds with different meanings. The "sacrificed flesh" could refer to the calves that would have had to have been killed to produce the vellum necessary for writing. It could also refer to the fact that monks were traditionally celibate. Like warriors, they had to make sacrifices for noble reasons. The words "sacrificed" and "flesh" also carry connotations of violence, like the words "arrowtip" and "lifeblood" earlier in the stanza. But this sacrifice of flesh is not for a fighting cause, but "for the love of words." Again, Hicks is setting up a parallel between men of poetry and men of war.

In the second half of the second stanza, Hicks transitions from describing and romanticizing the monk scribes of early Irish literature to imagining a scenario in which these monks know the future. The beginning of his question—"Had they known that other legends / would one day overwhelm Cúchulainn / and the brown bull of Cuailnge"—points again to the fact that the *Táin* is not part of the modern epic canon. Hicks wonders in lines 16-18, if the monks knew that this would happen, "would they, these men of poetry, / invite the bull watcher to safeguard / their herds of precious calfskin?" The aside "these men of poetry" reminds the reader of the quote at the beginning of the poem. Hicks is clarifying his connection between the "men of poetry" mentioned in the *Táin,* and the medieval monks who wrote down the *Táin*. The return to the quote also recalls Conall's telling Cú Chulainn that he would be good for looking

after men of poetry. Hicks then imagines just that; Cú Chulainn guarding the herds from which the monks get their vellum for writing. This image, as well as the repetition of Cú Chulainn's epithet, "bull watcher," recalls Cú Chulainn's status as a protector of cattle in the *Táin* (namely of the Brown Bull, but also of the herds of Ulster that were being pillaged by Medb's army).

The first half of the third stanza continues the hypothetical questioning, asking in lines 19-21 if the monks would warn Cú Chulainn of the violence to come. However, this violence is figurative. Hicks is now imagining the shaping of the literary canon as a battle, and Cú Chulainn as a defender of his own story against the future prevalence of others. Would the monks warn Cú Chulainn "that foreign men-- / warriors with strange names and gods-- / were riding to the Battlefield of Vellum"? Hicks' reference to foreign men with strange names and gods puts the reader in the perspective of Cú Chulainn, if he were to meet the warriors in the epics that have today taken precedence over his own. He would not have understood ancient Greek, for example, nor the set of gods that accompanied this language. Hicks then provides a name for the violent literary encounter he is envisioning: "the Battlefield of Vellum." The site at which epic heroes fight for a place in the canon is fittingly named after the material on which their stories were first recorded. The additional reference to vellum also cements the parallel between weapons of war and tools of writing. Hicks is even implying that tools of writing *are* weapons of war—at least in the fight over the canon. He finishes off his description of this literary violence with the image in line 22 of ink flowing "like blood."

The rest of the third stanza imagines what would happen if Cú Chulainn did know that he would be "overwhelmed" in the distant future. Hicks suggests, "young Cúchulainn / might scan the morning horizon". His use of the word "young" in line 23 could refer to the fact that Cú Chulainn was young for his whole life, dying at age 27. Therefore, he could always fittingly be

called “young Cú Chulainn.” It could also mean that Hicks’ image of Cú Chulainn at the end of the poem is the Cú Chulainn from the quote at the beginning, the boy who has just taken up arms as a warrior. After the romantic image of Cú Chulainn scanning the morning horizon, sword in his fist, Hicks says, “he stands now”. This line (25) suddenly switches the poem into the present, as though Cú Chulainn is, at this moment, “waiting for the world to be written” (26). This last line reminds us that the stories about Cú Chulainn take place in the time before written history, and before any of the epic stories in question were written down. It also evokes a sense that, whatever comes to kick him out of the canon, young Cú Chulainn, forewarned by the monks, will be ready. It is a rather romantic image; the young epic warrior as a defender of his own story against the forces that will shape literary canon.

It is hard to know how to interpret the end of Hicks’ “Reading the Táin.” The last image of the poem seems to show Cú Chulainn ready for anything. If warned by the monks, would he successfully fight off his competitors for the canon? Hicks’ inclusion of the quote at the beginning could support either answer. Conall tells Cú Chulainn that he is good for looking after men of poetry, but not yet ready for men of war. If this is true, then Cú Chulainn is good for protecting the monks’ “herds of precious calfskin,” but not ready to handle the “warriors with strange names and gods” who will come to overwhelm his story. However, those of us who know the *Táin* know that young Cú Chulainn almost immediately proves Conall wrong by killing the three sons of Nechta Scéne. So perhaps he is ready to take on these men of literary war. But the word “literary” is key here. As great of a warrior as Cú Chulainn is, he exists in a time before the written word. He knows nothing about the writing or reading of texts or the fact that works of literature will one day have to “fight” for precedence in the minds of modern readers. Of course he would assume, as the greatest warrior in Ulster, that he can beat any force that comes to

challenge him. But Cú Chulainn is naïve. This is one instance in which weapons and physical strength cannot win the fight. Therefore, the end of Hicks' "Reading the Táin" has a tragic sense to it. The reader knows, even though Cú Chulainn does not, that whatever Cú Chulainn does will be for naught. He has no control over how the canon will be shaped, and in fact, it has already happened.

In "Reading the Táin," Hicks dramatizes the forces that shape literary canon, picturing them as epic warriors on a battlefield of vellum. As a writer and academic, he has a unique perspective on the power of canon and how much it truly is a fight to change or influence it. "Reading the Táin" also creates a conflation of layers, a space where many things happen at the same time. The poem conflates past and present, fighting and writing, scenes from the *Táin* and the writing of the *Táin*, protection of bulls and production of vellum, the heroic age of Cú Chulainn and the medieval era, and more. Hicks especially romanticizes medieval Irish monks who wrote down stories like the *Táin*, as well as the processes of medieval writing and book production. This is shown in the material images he chooses to produce, such as "crushed pigment and beeswax," vellum and quills, as well as in phrases like "they dreamed myth onto stretched calfskin." This can be read as nostalgia for a time when writing was truly a visual art[9] and required physical as well as mental skill. Hicks is also expressing nostalgia for a time before the *Táin* was "overwhelmed" by other legends. He himself has been taken in by the story of Cú Chulainn, as shown in his first stanza, and laments the fact that this story is not more well-known.

We can see in Hicks' "Reading the Táin" a continuation of the modernist nostalgia present in Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*. However, the nostalgia here takes a

[9] Look up images of the Book of Kells for an example of this medieval artistry.

slightly different form. Like Lady Gregory, Hicks wants to recall the past heroic age of Ireland (real or imagined), represented by Cú Chulainn. However, unlike Lady Gregory, he also recalls the medieval era when the physical writing of the *Táin* occurred. While Lady Gregory strives to recreate or recover the lost oral tradition of Ireland, Hicks adds nostalgia for the story in its first *written* form. He reaccommodates the *Táin* and its oldness (alluded to with images of the materiality of medieval writing rather than with claimed links to oral tradition) slightly differently than Gregory and Yeats. Hicks imagines a scenario in which medieval monks interact with Cú Chulainn—he guards their cattle as they write his story, and they warn him about the coming of the canon. Hicks is reminiscing about a past that never happened, one in which the *Táin* could have been saved from being overwhelmed by other epics. Of course, Cú Chulainn and medieval Irish monks would not have existed at the same time, and the writing of the *Táin* could not have coincided with the forming of the epic canon. In fact, it seems both modern receptions of the *Táin* that we have examined, Lady Gregory's as well as Hicks', have done interesting things with the concept of time. *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* takes something old, makes it new, and presents it as old in an effort to foster Irish national identity. "Reading the Táin" conflates layers of temporality, bringing different moments of the past into the literary present, as though it were all happening right now. This is a variation of the same type of brand-new oldness presented by Gregory and Yeats. In both cases, the paradoxical manipulation of time is very telling of modernity, and of the modern desire to recall or recreate the past in the present. In this way, Hicks' poem shows a continuation of nostalgia for the Irish past also found in Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, and reproduced in physical, artistic monuments on the streets of modern Ireland.

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